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SUBJECT: THE GREAT GAME, IN MESOPOTAMIA: IRAQ AND ITS  
NEIGHBORS, PART II

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher R. Hill, for reasons 1.4 b and d.

11. (U) This is the second of two cables reviewing Iraq's relations with key neighboring countries. this cable focuses on Iraq's relations with Syria, in the wake of the August 19 bombings.

12. (C) Summary: Iraq's improving relations with its neighbors in 2008 and early 2009 represented a critical element in its efforts to maintain security and stability and normalize its position in the Gulf and the broader region. The August 19 bombings -- targeting the MFA, and by extension Iraq's improving relations with its neighbors -- represent a serious setback and have alarmed senior Iraqi officials, suggesting that Iraqi Sunni Arab neighbors in particular now view those earlier gains as "reversible." These fears help explain the rapid deterioration in relations with Syria and the GOI's demand that the UN intervene to investigate the August 19 bombings, so as to put Syria on notice that the international community is scrutinizing its use of Iraqi Ba'athist proxies to interfere in Iraq. Iraq's relations Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and Turkey are covered in Part I of this message. End Summary.

PROGRESS WITH THE NEIGHBORS, 2008-09  
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13. (C) From 2008 through much of the summer, Iraq's relations with its neighbors were on a positive trajectory overall. The breakthroughs in regional engagement began in the fall of 2008 (following sustained USG pressure), with the UAE, Bahrain, and Kuwait all sending ambassadors to Baghdad, along with Jordan, the Arab League, and Syria. Iraq also began its regular participation in the GCC 3 in 2008. While there was less formal movement in 2009, the positive trend continued, as the GOI named 58 new ambassadors and the Egyptian government took steps to return its ambassador. The continuing signs of improvement in security in Iraq in 2008 and the first half of 2009 provided a growing sense that Iraq was becoming a much more secure place and getting strong enough to ward off, or at least better control, neighbors' meddling in its internal affairs.

14. (C) However, not all the trendlines were positive during this period. Despite pressure from us, the Saudis refused to send an ambassador (although they received Iraq's ambassador in Riyadh), reflecting Riyadh's and King Abdullah's, in particular, deep-seated doubts about a Shia-led democracy in Iraq. Relations with other key countries in the region, including Syria, Kuwait, and even Turkey, also experienced varying degrees of drag on positive movement, ranging from foreign fighters issues in Syria to Chapter VII issues in Kuwait and water shortfalls from Turkey. The perception among many Iraqis during this period was that despite the gains in normalization and regional integration, Iraq was a pitiful (former) regional giant, preyed upon and held back in various ways by neighbors intent on keeping it weak and taking advantage of it.

15. (C) The August 19 bombings which severely damaged the MFA and the Ministry of Finance buildings and Baghdad's residents' sense of improving security, brought these negative trendlines into sharp relief. The bombings undercut the perception of normalization that had become a commonplace over the past eighteen months (and undercut PM Maliki's platform of having delivered on security). Iraqis, both official and unofficial, believe it was no accident that one of the main targets, and the one that suffered the most damage, is the MFA, symbol of Iraq's efforts to build relations with its neighbors and normalize its position in the region.

16. (C) In the immediate aftermath of the bombings, FM Zebari made accusations that one or more of the neighboring countries had conspired with al-Qaeda, possibly using proxies, to support the bombings. In a meeting with the Ambassador, PM Maliki referred to a "momentum of interference" that was building in the lead-up to the January national elections. Zebari described the next 5-6 month time-frame as "a period of maximum danger" for Iraq. The bombings were meant to convey the perception -- welcomed by some neighbors, he insisted -- that the security and normalization in Iraq of the past two years were "reversible."

DO THE NEIGHBORS HAVE IT IN FOR IRAQ?

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17. (C) Iraqi contacts speculated that regional unease about

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a Shia-led Iraqi government, and about the democratic character of that government, a model that could eventually undermine the legitimacy of more autocratic regimes in the region, helped explain why some neighbors would prefer a weak and unstable Iraq, where security and political gains of the past two years are rolled back. Acting NSC Advisor Dr. Safa al-Sheikh described the neighbors as bent on intervening in Iraq, especially in the months leading up to the January 2010 elections. While some used proxies to foment violence, others restricted themselves to money, media (propaganda), and meddling, all designed to help shape electoral coalitions, and block or further individual political careers, in order to better control Iraq and keep it weak, politically fractured, and pliable, insisted al-Sheikh. PM Maliki told the Ambassador that neighbors feared a resurgent Iraq that would capture too much of "the limelight." According to Maliki, neighbors also feared Iraq's "golden connection between Shia and Sunni Islam," a legacy that gives Iraq special precedence in the region. His argument is based on a well-acknowledged fact that Iraq is the grand junction of Shia and Sunni Islam as well as of the Arab world and Persia, making it, therefore, both strategically vital but also vulnerable. The view of key contacts here is that some of Iraq's Sunni Arab neighbors have concluded that in a stable, peaceful Iraqi democracy, Sunni political power in Iraq would be finished. These Arab neighbors, therefore, conclude that the only way the Sunnis will ever come back into power in Iraq is in the wake of a period of sustained instability and violence that de-legitimizes democratic governance and the Shia as Iraqi political leaders.

RELATIONS WITH SYRIA IN CRISIS

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18. (C) Relations with Syria suffered the most precipitous decline in the wake of the attacks, with mutual recalls of Ambassadors and public statements making clear the GOI felt Syria was complicit. While Syrian support for Iraqi Ba'athists has long been a significant bilateral irritant, the GOI's public claim that Syrian-based insurgents were responsible for August 19 represented a significant shift.

To the al-Maliki government, the problem was now seen as an existential threat to the state and the GOI could no longer treat the issue with routine diplomacy, especially given fears these attacks were only the first wave. According to Maliki and al-Sheikh, senior Iraqi security officers had seen a growing body of intelligence in the months leading up to attacks indicating significant cooperation between Iraqi Ba'athists and al-Qaeda, although Sheikh acknowledged that the proof for Iraqi Ba'athist involvement in the August 19 bombings had been assembled "somewhat quickly." He explained that at the cell level, Ba'athists participate with some al-Qaida groups -- usually disguising their Baathist sympathies -- and often dominate the local groups because they have highly prized skills such as experience handling weapons and explosives.

¶9. (C) Iraqi officials make clear that despite the current problems with Syria, they foresee the possibility of improved relations in the future. PM Maliki recently stated that Iraq wanted a harder-line USG policy toward Syria only to the extent it would help compel Syria to stop misbehaving and be a better neighbor. The problem, according to Maliki and others, is that Syria is a neighborhood menace with a history of fomenting violence and inciting instability in the region -- and it viewed these tactics as part of the standard tools of diplomacy. Iraq's problem is that it is too weak on its own to intimidate Syria into behaving. With no troops "to mass on the border" as a threat, as Turkey had once done, and taking his cue from Lebanon's experience following the Hariri assassination, Maliki felt he had no recourse but to take the issue to the UNSC, hoping this diplomatic "stick" might persuade Bashar and his regime to back off. Iraq is looking to the United States and other members of the P-5 to endorse the appointment by the UNSYG of a senior official to investigate the August 19 bombings and external support for terrorism in Iraq. (NOTE: Not all Iraqi officials agreed with the PM's approach. On September 5, Iraq's three presidents -- Talabani, Hashimi and Abd al-Mahdi -- issued a statement calling for containing tension between Iraq and Syria through diplomatic channels, an obvious rejection of Maliki's insistence on UN involvement. END NOTE.)

¶10. (U) Iraq's relations Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran and Turkey are covered in Part I of this message.

HILL